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AUTHOR New, Rebecca S.
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ABSTRACT

An internationally acclaimed program that challenges American notions of appropriate early education is the municipal early childhood program in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The town's liberal financial support of child care and citizen membership in school committees indicate strong community support. Parents are involved in school policy discussions, child development concerns, and curriculum planning. The administration of the early childhood program consists of a head administrator, team leaders, and teachers. There is no hierarchical relationship among teachers. Teacher in-service education is provided through extensive staff development opportunities. The organization of the physical environment of the school is crucial to the program. Spaces are designed so that classrooms are integrated with the school and schools with the surrounding community. Class activities include projects that teacners work on with small groups of children. Project topics are chosen based on teacher observations of children's play, or teachers' or parents' academic curiosity. As they proceed in their investigation of a topic, children are encouraged to depict their understanding through drawing, sculpture, dramatic play, and writing. Several characteristics of the Reggio Emilia approach that challenge American conceptions of developmentally appropriate practice include teachers' beliefs in the importance of being confused as a contributor to learning and the importance of children's ability to negotiate in peer groups. (Contains nine references.) (BC)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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# Reggio Emilia: Some Lessons for U.S. Educators

Rebecca S. New

During the past several decades, U.S. educators have increasingly turned their attention to other nations' policies and practices to inform deliberations on American child care and early education. One internationally acclaimed program that supports and challenges American notions of appropriate early education is the municipal early childhood program in Reggio Emilia, Italy. For the past 25 years, this affluent northern Italian community has committed 12% of the town budget to the provision of high quality child care for children six years and under. Today the community boasts 22 preprimary schools and 14 infant-toddler centers serving about half of the city's young children.

There is much about Reggio Emilia's approach to child care and education that distinguishes it from other efforts both inside and outside of Italy and that attracts worldwide attention. Of special interest is the emphasis on children's *symbolic languages* in the context of a project-oriented curriculum. This feature has been well-documented in two traveling exhibitions. The Reggio Emilia approach is made possible through a carefully articulated and collaborative approach to the care and education of young children.

### Community Support and Parental Involvement

Reggio Emilia's tradition of community support for families with young children expands on Italy's cultural view of children as the collective responsibility of the state. In Reggio Emilia, the infant/toddler and preprimary program is a vital part of the community, as reflected in the high level of financial support. Community involvement is also apparent in citizen membership in *La Consulta*, a school committee that exerts significant influence over local government policy.

The parents' role mirrors the community's, at both the schoolwide and the classroom level. Parents are expected to take part in discussions about school policy, child development concerns, and curriculum planning and evaluation. Because a majority of parents—including mothers—are employed, meetings are held in the evenings so that all who wish to participate can do so.

### Administrative Policies and Organizational Features

The administration of the Reggio Emilia early childhood program is moderately representative of other Italian community-based programs. A head administrator, who reports directly to the town council, works with a group of *pedagogista* (curriculum team leaders), each of whom coordinates the efforts of teachers from five or six centers. Each center is staffed with two teachers per classroom (12 children in infant classes, 18 in toddler classes, and 24 in preprimary classes), one *atelierista* (a teacher trained in the arts who works with classroom teachers in curriculum development and documentation), and several auxiliary staff. There is no principal, nor is there a hierarchial relationship among the teachers. This staffing plan, coupled with the policy of keeping the same group of children and teachers together for a period of three years, facilitates the sense of community that characterizes relationships among adults and children.

Other features of Reggio Emilia's approach to early education that have generated interest among American educators include the concept of teachers as learners, the importance attributed to the role of the environment, the use of long-term projects with small groups of children as the major curriculum strategy, and the emphasis on children's many symbolic languages.

### Teachers as Learners

Teachers' long-term commitment to enhancing their understanding of children is at the crux of the Reggio Emilia approach. Their resistance to the American use of the term model to describe their program reflects the continuing evolution of their ideas and practices. They compensate for the meager preservice training of Italian early childhood teachers by providing extensive staff development opportunities, with goals determined by the teachers themselves. Teacher autonomy is evident in the absence of teacher manuals, curriculum guides, or achievement tests. The lack of externally imposed mandates is joined by the imperative that teachers become skilled observers of children in order to inform their curriculum planning and implementation.

Teachers routinely divide responsibilities in the class so that one can systematically observe, take notes, and record conversations between children. These observations are shared with other teachers and the *atelierista* and parents in curriculum planning and evaluation. Teachers of several schools often work and learn together under the leadership of the *pedagogista* as they explore ways of expanding on children's spontaneous activities.

### The Role of the Environment

The organization of the physical environment is crucial to Reggio Emilia's early childhood program. Major aims in the planning of new spaces and the remodeling of old ones include the integration of each classroom with the rest of the school, and the school with the surrounding community. Classrooms open to a center piazza, kitchens are open to view, and access to the surrounding community is assured through wall-size windows, courtyards, and doors to the outside in each classroom. Entries capture the attention of both children and adults through the use of mirrors (on the walls, floors, and ceilings), photographs, and children's work accompanied by transcriptions of their discussions. These same features characterize classroom interiors, where displays of project work are interspersed with arrays of found objects and classroom materials. In each case, the environment informs and engages the viewer.

Other supportive elements of the environment include ample space for supplies, frequently arranged to draw attention to their

aesthetic features. In each classroom there are studio spaces in the form of a large, centrally located atelier and a smaller mini-atelier, and clearly designated spaces for large- and small-group activities. Throughout the school, there is an effort to create opportunities for children to interact. Thus, the single dress-up area is in the center piazza; classrooms are connected with phones, passageways or windows; and lunchrooms and bathrooms are designed to encourage playful encounters. It is no wonder that Reggio Emilia teachers refer to the environment as *our third teacher.*

### Long-Term Projects as Vehicles for Learning

The curriculum is characterized by many features advocated by contemporary research on young children, including real-life problem-solving among peers, with numerous opportunities for creative thinking and exploration. Teachers often work on projects with small groups of children, while the rest the class engages in a wide variety of self-selected activities typical of preschool classrooms.

The projects that teachers and children engage in are distinct in a number of ways from those that characterize American teachers' conceptions of unit or thematic studies. The topic of investigation may derive directly from teacher observations of children's spontaneous play and exploration. Project topics are also selected on the basis of an academic curiosity or social concern on the part of teachers or parents, or serendipitous events that direct the attention of the children and teachers. Reggio teachers place a high value on their ability to improvise and respond to children's predisposition to enjoy the unexpected. Regardless of their origins, successful projects are those that generate a sufficient amount of interest and uncertainty to provoke children's creative thinking and problem-solving and are open to different avenues of exploration. Because curriculum decisions are based on developmental and sociocultural concerns, small groups of children of varying abilities and interests, including those with special needs, work together on projects.

Projects begin with teachers observing and questioning children about the topic of interest. Based on children's responses, teachers introduce materials, questions, and opportunities that provoke children to further explore the topic. While some of these teacher provocations are anticipated, projects often move in unanticipated directions as a result of problems children identify. Thus, curriculum planning and implementation revolve around open-ended and often long-term projects that are based on the reciprocal nature of teacher-directed and child-initiated activity.

### The Hundred Languages of Children

As children proceed in an investigation, generating and testing their hypotheses, they are encouraged to depict their understanding through one of many symbolic languages, including drawing, sculpture, dramatic play, and writing. They work together towards the resolution of problems that arise. Teachers facilitate and then observe debates regarding the extent to which a child's drawing or other form of representation lives up to the expressed intent. Revision of drawings (and ideas) is encouraged, and teachers allow children to repeat activities and modify each other's work in the collective aim of better understanding the topic. Teachers foster children's involvement in the processes of exploration and evaluation, acknowledging the importance of their evolving products as vehicles for exchange.

### Conclusion

Reggio Emilia's approach to early education reflects a theoretical kinship with Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, among others. Much of what occurs in the class reflects a constructivist approach to early education. Yet, Reggio Emilia's approach challenges some American conceptions of teacher competence and developmentally appropriate practice. For example, teachers in Reggio Emilia assert the importance of being confused as a contributor to learning; thus a major teaching strategy is to purposefully allow for mistakes to happen, or to begin a project with no clear sense of where it might end. Another characteristic that is counter to the beliefs of many American educators is the importance of the child's ability to negotiate in the peer group, which renders teacher intervention in children's conflicts minimal. One of the most challenging aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach is the solicitation of multiple points of view regarding children's needs, interests, and abilities, and the concurrent faith in parents, teachers, and children to contribute in meaningful ways to the determination of school experiences. Teachers trust themselves to respond appropriately to children's ideas and interests, they trust children to be interested in things worth knowing about, and they trust parents to be informed and productive members of a cooperative educational team. The result is an atmosphere of community and collaboration that is developmentally appropriate for adults and children alike.

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### For More Information


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